

Bible Studies for Life for May 3: Barzillai: The man who grew old gracefully

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The word “character” can be defined as someone who has moral and ethical qualities that drives them to act correctly when faced with compromising dilemmas. How does a person develop good character?

For many, it is by learning from another person who exhibits honesty, courage and integrity as they live. During the month of May, the Bible Studies For Life lessons will explore a different individual each week who can help us develop good character traits of our own. The study theme for the unit will be “Profiles in Character.”

Do we know how to grow old gracefully? The first individual we’ll look at is a senior adult man named Barzillai. He is a man who grew old gracefully and in his mature years was a big help to David.

Help God’s people when you can (2 Samuel 17:27-29)

The Bible records many times when God’s chosen leaders are removed from their position of leadership because of rebellion. David’s son Absalom plotted against his father to take away the throne. Absalom was a handsome and charismatic young man and would have made a good king.

Absalom was not like his father who sinned, strayed away from God, but later repented and learned from his mistakes. He sinned and kept on sinning.

Even though he preached justice, that was not his agenda. Absalom’s

charisma and personable spirit allowed him to steal the hearts of the people (2 Samuel 15:5). Many people were fooled and switched their loyalty.

Absalom crowned himself king in Hebron and proved to be an evil ruler. David had to flee Jerusalem to the eastern side of the River Jordan. David and his men set up camp at Mahanaim and became a government-in-exile. Absalom and his army pursued David and camped in Gilead, just north of Mahanaim.

Even though David found himself without provisions and food, the Lord provided. Wealthy men of the region “brought bedding and bowls and articles of pottery” as well as “wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from cows’ milk for David and his people to eat” (vv. 28-29).

Barzillai was part of this group of wealthy men who provided for David. He was an old and important leader of the region of Gilead. Barzillai helped David because he saw they were in the desert with nothing. By helping David, he was at risk of being discovered by Absalom. He was willing to accept the risk in order to help someone in need.

Should Christians be risk takers when someone’s well being is compromised? Barzillai was in a position to help and he did.

Realistically evaluate your capacities (2 Samuel 19:31-37)

After Absalom was killed in battle, David was able to return to Jerusalem. Barzillai accompanied him as far as the Jordan River. David invited him to, “Cross over with me and stay with me in Jerusalem, and I will provide for you” (v. 34). David wanted to return the favor because of what Barzillai had done for him.

Barzillai was 80 years old and declined the king’s offer. He did this because

he did not want to become a burden to David and wanted to die in his homeland (v. 37).

Did Barzillai understand completely what he was doing? The king was offering a free ride for the rest of his life. The wise old man knew exactly what he was doing. Earlier in his life, he would have seen this as an opportunity to be a voice in the king's cabinet. He recognized he was growing old and his mind was no longer sharp as it once was. A wise man knows when it is time to retire. Growing old gracefully allows one to know when to say no.

Be a champion for the next generation (2 Samuel 19:37-39)

Barzillai was a very wise man. He understood that senior adults have the responsibility to encourage the younger generations to take on positions of leadership.

Barzillai said to David, "But here is your servant Kimham. Let him cross over with my lord the king. Do for him whatever pleases you" (v. 37). The king was very willing to grant the request. Barzillai saw an opportunity to pass the baton of responsibility to a much younger person he trusted.

Does your church hold a Youth Sunday? This is a day when a church allows the youth membership of the church to be the leaders in Sunday school and worship on a special Sunday. The youth teach, lead worship music and preach. What a great way to ignite the spark of service in our future leaders in the local church. I preached my very first sermon on Youth Sunday some 30 years ago.

Leave a good memory (1 Kings 2:1, 7)

As David was dying, he told his son and successor Solomon, "show kindness to the sons of Barzillai of Gilead and let them eat at your table" (v. 7). David remembered how Barzillai supported him in his past and wanted Solomon

to continue to show favor to Barzillai's descendents.

The act of kindness Barzillai expressed to David when he was in exile had an impact on the king.

What legacy do you want to leave behind? Grow old gracefully by cultivating the virtues of faith and service demonstrated to you by the lives of the faithful senior adults in your church.